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PARADOX

The Hidden Curriculum

From Complacency to Conforming Controversy

Stuart Bennett

Introduction

The call for papers for this conference appeared to be concerned with subversive curricula delivered under the radar of the bureaucratic academy rather than anxiety about the unstated academic and social norms of art education. Situations that are assumed, unwritten, imagined and therefore inflexible and can hinder the students' ability to develop an independence of thought or a sense of creative inquiry.

In Benson R. Snyder's book 'The Hidden Curriculum' (1971) he noted that at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the 1960s, the curriculum was becoming congested with the expansion of technological knowledge. Undergraduates were taking short cuts in their learning. For example, they couldn't digest everything they were being taught, so they tactically tried to guess what would be assessed and revised only that part of the teaching. Snyder's additional insight, however, was to identify that, unintentionally, the Institute was teaching them to act strategically, hence the term "hidden curriculum". The learning acquired from the hidden curriculum has been referred to as "default learning"; learning acquired by default through participation in the activities of a school, college, academy or university rather than what has been directly taught.

I would also like to posit the inevitability of nostalgia about art school education. Nostalgia that still exists in the structure of my own institution in relation to the teaching of discipline specific fine art subjects separately e.g. painting, sculpture, photography students were only taught by staff in those subjects. I question the role of research and history in perpetuating certain myths about both the purpose of the artist and the romanticism of the art school. Of course much is left unspoken in the production of art practice, the language we use is predominantly visual but the process of communication we have with our students should avoid hidden or encoded messages as the absence of communication is itself a communication, so something else happens that is not the intended content of the teaching or learning and the students try to work that out for themselves. So we need to ensure the students have trust and confidence as the best environment for taking risks is a secure one.

'My argument is that to appreciate how visual arts contributes to human understanding, there is a need to locate artistic research within the theories and practices that surround art making. It is from this central site of creative practice that other forms of inquiry emerge, such as critical and philosophical analysis, historical and cultural commentary, and educational experience. This notion is a far cry from the stereotype that sees art experience as a warm, fuzzy, and essentially private matter. Rather, it affirms that artistic thinking and

making are cognitive processes.....'

Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts Sullivan 2010

To start I would like to make it clear that I will be addressing you from the standpoint of art education as a process of self-discovery. To quote Tim Ingold from his book "Making": "To know things you have to grow into them, and let them grow into you, so that they become part of who you are." (Ingold 2013)

An art education should ensure students are aware that they, and I quote Ingold again, "learn *from* those *with* whom (or which) we study." (Ingold 2013) In that sense I am making no distinction between practice and theory as both are part of fine art education and are too often separated out. Making things and images involves learning from a variety of different material. In the same sense that we may learn from the ideas of others we also learn through working with the physical world. An art school education should open up perceptions of what is going on in our world so we can respond to it not just describe or represent it. And most teaching does this but perhaps does not articulate it clearly enough. As an undergraduate student to be given the permission to accept that making work that stems from a seemingly pointless activity (the performance of practice) is more valid a starting point as painting a still life (the depiction of the world) is a pivotal moment.

I mean that very broadly, from the late 90s post educational turn perspective, and with making as performance rather than representation, the materiality of art that cuts across and through language and produces, rather than represents, reality. The thinking here has been determined by the processes of conceiving and realising artworks - much of this paper arises out of and returns to material practice rather than academe.

It has been stated that thinkers can describe the 'don't know' nature of making but the artists live it. This may be so but if artists can speak of living it, differently to critics, historians, sociologists, anthropologists etc would that not be beneficial within an educational context where the practice, history and theory of making is at the core? To enable a sense of undergoing rather than doing for those that learn with us?

Without some description of the ontological process of making there are gaps for false notions about the 'gift' of creativity, the mythologising of the 'creative process', the sense that we have to situate ourselves in a studio all day and night rendering our soul into a stream of 'meaningful' images or objects.

It is being aware of what the difference is that aids the understanding that making functionless objects, illusory images or ideational experiences is not different or other (or worse still 'wacky' or 'a bit left field') but vital. Students need to be exposed to a range of theories, positions and ideologies not just put in a studio and expected to create.

Otherwise, as Abraham Maslow stated in the Psychology of Science; 'It is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail'.

Merger

The main idea of this paper is to reframe the contested nature of the art school in a university context, to reconsider and recalibrate what is vital in art education. The provocation here is to suggest that rather than working against the governing institution, (perhaps the historical precedence for art schools in universities), you work with it, and within it, using its structures and systems to refocus the relationship between teaching, administration and research. And through this lens reconsider what specialist or discipline specific teaching and learning is, or could be.

On 1st August 2011 Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) ceased to exist as a small specialist institution and was subsumed into the University of Edinburgh as one of eleven Schools in the College of Humanities and Social Science. The programme and course structure of the College and the University looked the same (students take courses to make up their programme of study) but the teaching in the University was articulated at course level. In the College the teaching resided in the programme of study and the courses were very generic in terms of content.

The origins of University education in Scotland stipulated that the first year of the four year undergraduate degree, students used to study Philosophy. This was to ensure students learned how to think before they started to think about a discipline.

Arguably Foundation courses in Art in England and first year in Scottish Art Colleges are the last remaining bastions of that philosophical, diagnostic approach. They provide students with core underlying restrictions that form into some sort of devotion to a particular way of working. At ECA students can specialise in one subject for four years. We recognise art practice is post media but our art education still relies on subject specific teaching in a more concentrated way than other arts subjects. So regardless of any institutional pressure would it not be beneficial to consider a more open approach to learning using the new playground that is the University of Edinburgh? The history, theory and practice of art encompasses more than just the teaching within the discipline.

Projects are used throughout the first and second years of study in Art at ECA. I would attest that project based subject specific teaching is often predicated on an open-ended mimetic brief – a mix of what we think artists might do and how we remember being taught ourselves. The briefs for the projects were often ‘made up’, by that I mean untethered from a real life experience, and often repeated year upon year. Many had no bibliographies but a list of artists’ names and most were usually working from a semantic analogy or a process e.g. ‘Material Constructs’ or ‘Journey’.

Staff regard these as a way of kick starting students to ‘make work’ without defining clear restrictions, guidance or rules. Perhaps projects are more prevalent in Scotland because the art colleges were independent institutions

and staff invented ways of working without the administrative burden of creating courses. Maybe younger artists coming in to work with students felt the need for a more structured form of teaching as a response to their own educational experience. I know I did when I started teaching. I used projects as what I would now define as mini courses. In my experience projects in art school are a form of ungoverned curricula. This is fine if the project is good, clear about what is expected from the students during the project, in terms of workload, contact hours with staff, what to hand in for assessment and the assessment criteria and are constructively aligned to the courses and programmes they are part of but many did not follow this rationale. Here I'll quote Rowntree in "Assessing Students" from 1977; "...to set students off in pursuit of an unnamed quarry may be merely wasteful but to grade them on whether they catch it or not is positively mischievous".

Additionally, despite the fervour to maintain the disciplines in my own institution, looking at the content of the projects, it was difficult to distinguish which programme was teaching which project.

So, of course there is a necessity for different types of teaching that are freed from the conventions of curricula but the advent of student fees (in some parts of the UK) means that not only do students expect (and are paying for) clear articulation from staff about their teaching and learning, what is expected of them and of us, when, how, where and what will happen. And increasingly they want flexibility and choice – something art education has not encouraged as the discipline itself has a broad scope. But as generalists, do we know enough about the range of discourse that art practice spans? Or do we have colleagues in other disciplines (neuroscience, philosophy, literature, psychology, anthropology, sociology are the first that spring to mind) with whom we can construct curriculum with us to engage learning and reflection on practice?

Looking further back to the 1970s (the same time as Rowntree was expounding learning outcome centred assessment and Snyder was identifying default learning) there was enough demand in art colleges for art and design to be recognised as academic subjects that Universities validated art college degrees. So art has been an academic subject for most of my lifetime and, going back to my reference to the perceived division between theory and practice in art and design education, I think we should not undervalue the importance of making, of art practice, by suggesting it would be weakened by regarding it alongside theory and history or other university subjects.

Form, Transformation, Information

As an artist working in academia there is another responsibility I think. In some respect our job is to receive messages, to translate messages, and to send messages framed in terms of transmission and communication. Michel Serres gives a good example of ethics using the trope of the angel to understand communication.

He said in an interview with the writer Hari Kunzru; (quote) *I am a professor, and when I give a lecture, in the beginning I am Michel Serres, I am the real person who speaks. I must make a seduction for my students. I may begin with a joke, for example. After that I must disappear as a person on behalf of the message itself. The problem of disappearing as myself, to give way to the message itself, is the ethics of the messenger.*

So you reduce your own subjectivity?

Yes, the reason why angels are invisible is because they are disappearing to let the message go through them.

Serres' first point was to understand and to clarify our jobs in a practical way, avoiding the spiritual problems but speaking about logical or practical problems. The problem of good and evil for instance is very easy to explain when you see that the messenger or channel is neutral, and on a neutral channel you can say I love you or I hate you, that's good or that's bad, I like it or I don't like it.

To describe our work as communicators and message bearers Serres uses a history of labour.

There are three steps. In the beginning our ancestors were working with physical energies, with the body, with their muscles, as peasants. Like the caryatids who supported Greek temples, or Atlas, who carried the sky on his shoulders. These are figures of the first type of work.

The second step is transformation of metals by engines and machines - the industrial revolution. He uses three words that he states are the same word - form, transformation and information - the three steps. In the first step this form was solid as a statue. Atlas, the caryatid. In the second step the metal becomes liquid. In the third step we are living in the volatile transmission. This word volatile is angelic form. The transmission of message, of code, of signal is volatile. The transmission of information.

Michael Polanyi comments in *The Tacit Dimension* that in all approaches to knowledge we need to start from the fact that 'we can know more than we can tell'. This pre-logical phase of knowing was for him 'tacit knowledge'. For Polanyi this was extensive. *Riding a bike example.*

He stressed that all communication, everything we know about mental processes or feelings, all of our relationships to conscious intellectual activities, are based on a knowledge, which we cannot tell. What is not articulated remains untold and therefore tacit.

"I learn through my hands, my eyes, and my skin what I can never learn through my brain." M.C.Richards

But Tim Ingold asserts that in both its senses - the verbal relating of stories and the combination of sensory awareness with material variations - telling is a practice of correspondence. At a personal level, knowing and telling are one and the same.

Perhaps artists make things so they don't need to be present at all – the message goes through the transistor that is the object, image, experience of the work, the assertion of making, and implants itself on the intellect of the

viewer hoping to leave some kind of latent residue. So they don't need to tell. But as artist teachers we do need to be able to provide a way of telling that can be grasped.

Rereading and the alienating intimacy of the personal experience of making is well articulated by Mieke Bal. She talks of placing art first before influence, context, iconography, and historical lineage. How can we do an artwork justice of being an artwork and also learn from it as a theory on and example of thought about art? And how can the often solitary nature of making, that alienating intimacy, be made less peculiar as an experience while maintaining its insight?

So my point here is to suggest that rather than having a studio-based course with a generic title e.g. 'Visual Research' taught by a large team of staff would it not be more progressive to suggest staff work together on courses that relate to their own work? Also would or could these courses feed into or stem from research projects? Or could a course be a member of staff's work? If as we claim that we are an engaged community encompassing a diverse range of expertise can the courses be devised through aspects of staff research interests?

And, paradoxically, is this not precisely how the Arts and Humanities in Universities devise their courses and programmes?

Of course the anxiety here is that the teaching of material based disciplines dissipates – there is less time with the students making things because they've got more choice and have decided to take a course in Business German, or that if we no longer have courses called Painting or Sculpture or Printmaking, we're not addressing key aspects of practice or material based learning. But if the strength is there in depth in the faculty's work (and by their work I mean their teaching, administration and research) then the new courses that emerge should be innovative, fresh, rooted in experience, stem from practice, in flux and crucially, reflexive.

Also, as academic staff and as artists, if we value the role of art and artists in society should we not be prepared to share our knowledge more widely to shift attitudes to contemporary art practice? Is that not the duty of the civic University and the social role of the artist? Does that not bring our work, research, practice (whatever we want to call it) and our teaching closer together? Could we dispel myths about the personal, private, creative expression of the unique artist if students from other disciplines studied our courses?

Conclusion

Charles Esche stated in his essay 'Include me Out'.

"The idea of the art academy is a paradox that can be reconciled only if we keep contrary objectives and ideals in sight" Esche 2009

I would extend that to propose that *within* the academy we need to keep contrary objectives and ideals in sight. That way we can cultivate an

environment and a community where we learn *from* and *with* each other and *from* and *with* stuff.

For undergraduate students, working within a specialism defines parameters that can be challenged and establishes a position. I'm just not sure that the specialisms in art education should only be defined by historical, material or methodological difference. Being complacent about what we think we are teaching can leave students trying to work out what they think they are learning or worse still, what they think we want. Used well, the composition and administration of the University can ensure we can get on with developing content that is clear, thought through, transdisciplinary and progressive. Importantly it may help the range, the form, transformation and information of our correspondence with students transmit with clarity. The detached affinity of personal experience through making writ large, shared and not left to mythological conjecture or conventional deduction.

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